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RELATIONS BETWEEN THE REPUBLIC OF BELARUS AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ IN 1991–2014

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Abstract: The article considers the history of relations between Belarus and Iraq in 1991–2014. Three main periods are identified: 1991–1995; 1995–2003; 2003–2014. Relations with Iraq reflect the main characteristics of the Belarusian foreign policy: strong dependence on Russia; careful and cautious approach in spite of the dictatorship image; inclination to different corruptive schemes; using foreign policy in promoting the "conspiracy rhetoric" in the domestic ideology.

Keywords: Iraq, Belarus, Belarus-Iraq Relations, S. Hussein, Iraqi Crisis, Multivectored Foreign Policy.

АДНОСІНЫ ПАМІЖ РЭСПУБЛІКАЙ БЕЛАРУСЬ І РЭСПУБЛІКАЙ ІРАК У 1991–2014 ГАДАХ

Анатацыя: У артыкуле разгледжана гісторыя адносінаў паміж Беларуссю і Іракам у 1991–2014 гадах. Вылучаны тры перыяды: 1991–1995; 1995–2003; 2003–2014 гады. Адносіны з Іракам адлюстроўваюць асноўныя рысы беларускай знешняй палітыкі: моцная залежнасць ад Расіі; руплівы і асцярожны падыход, нягледзячы на вобраз дыктатуры; схільнасць да розных карупцыйных схем; выкарыстанне знешняй палітыкі ў прасоўванні "канспіралагічнай рыторыкі" ва ўнутранай ідэалогіі.

Ключавыя словы: Ірак, Беларусь, беларуска-іракскія адносіны, С. Хусейн, іракскі крызіс, шматвектарная знешняя палітыка.

In spite of their secondary significance in the Belarusian foreign policy, Belarus-Iraq relations are quite interesting from the point of view of understanding the strong and weak sides of Belarusian diplomacy, as well as some specific peculiarities of the country's foreign policy.

Generally, the history of Belarus-Iraq relations in 1991–2014 can be divided into 3 periods.

The first period (1991–1995) is characterised by a virtual absence of any contacts between the two countries due to the maturation of the Belarusian diplomacy during the first year of independence, as well as due to the sanctions imposed on Iraq according to the Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.

The diplomatic relations between Iraq and Belarus were established in 1992 through the Iraqi Embassy in Moscow. It should be considered that the two countries had had mutual contacts during the Soviet times and Iraq which had fallen under the international sanctions was particularly interested in establishing contacts with the new post-Soviet states. The Belarusian government which suffered from lack of resources and was partly pro-Russian, partly pro-Western (especially, pro-American) oriented, did not consider S. Hussein's Iraq as a prospective partner. Moreover, according to K. Kamyshev, the most important recognitions of Belarus as an independent state occurred in 1991 (at the end of 1991, 54 states recognised Belarus and 2 of them established diplomatic relations with the country). In spite of the desire to establish and promote mutual contacts with different countries in the first years of its independence, Belarus was very cautious about the contacts with Iraq. Officially, the Belarusian legislative document concerning the establishment of diplomatic relations with Iraq was issued only in 1996. Only on June 24, 1997 the Iraqi Ambassador to Russia (with concurrent accreditation to Belarus) submitted his credentials to the President A. Lukašenka. In 1991–1994, the Belarusian government in its policy towards the Middle East inclined to develop the relations with such countries as Kuwait, the UAE, Egypt, etc., rather than with Iraq. Nevertheless, the Middle East in general was not considered among the main directions of the foreign policy of Belarus.

The second period encompasses the years 1995–2003 and can be characterised as a period of the maximum cooperation between Iraq and Belarus. Nevertheless, this cooperation was very specific and vividly reflected the nature of the political regimes of the both countries. First of all, in spite of numerous rumors and publications in mass-media, the Belarusian authorities were very careful and cautious about the imposed restrictions on Iraq and generally followed them. Only few examples can be mentioned which cast no more than a shadow of doubt on the Belarusian activities in Iraq. The Belarusian government actively participated in the Oil-for-Food-Program. The Program itself was allegedly corruptive and numerous

scandals are associated with it. Belarus was not able to avoid a scandal which was connected with unreasonably close relations between the S. Hussein's regime and the Liberal-Democratic Party of Belarus. It is worthy to say that the similar contacts were established between the Iraqi government and the Liberal-Democratic party of Russia (headed by V. Zhirinovsky). A lot of experts believe that Belarus followed the "non-transparent schemes" developed in Russia. In any case, the measures of possible abuse of the Oil-for-Food-Program by Belarus are incomparable with the scandals associated with this program and some other participating countries. Moreover, the thorough analysis of the Belarusian relations with other countries affected by international sanctions reveals that the official Minsk has never dared to challenge the policy and vital interests of the world's leading states, including the USA, China and Russia.

In spite of the limited number of Belarusian embassies abroad in the late 1990s – early 2000s, a separate Embassy to Iraq was opened in Baghdad in 2000. At the end of this year, the Iraqi Embassy to Belarus started its work in Minsk.

It is necessary to emphasise that in spite of numerous contacts with different Arab countries in 1995–2003, only two of them – Syria and Iraq – can be recognised as more or less full-fledged partners of Belarus.

The "non-transparent schemes" in relations with Iraq are more interesting from the point of view of the internal political situation in Belarus, especially in relation to the President's budget. There is no accountability regarding this budget and the origin of its money is not clear. Close-to-state companies were established for cooperation with Iraq in the frames of the Oil-for-Food-Program, their financial activities remain non-transparent till nowadays. Belarus initiated a project for oil extraction in Iraq. No details are available for public but the similar unsuccessful projects in Iran and Venezuela, which appeared to be a form of corruption, prove that the perspectives of oil extraction in Iraq by Belarus were very vague.

The third period started in 2003 with the multinational forces invasion into Iraq. According to some evaluations, because of the fall of the S. Hussein's regime, Belarus lost about 2 billion US dollars while the Iraqi assessment in Belarus did not exceed 1 million US dollar. Some very influential people in the Belarusian establishments lost their money in Iraq and this fact explains why the post-Saddam period in the Belarus-Iraq relations can be characterised as the period of distrust by the Belarusian government to the new Iraqi authorities.

After the formation of the new Iraqi government, it made all possible efforts to maintain contacts with Belarus but the Belarusian government almost officially declared Iraq to be a puppet state of the USA and rejected most of the Iraqi proposals.

As it has been mentioned and according to the above mentioned data, the Belarus-Iraq relations clearly emphasised the peculiarities of the Belarusian diplomacy.

Firstly, it is a strong dependence on Russia. For example, the two recent visits of the Belarusian Foreign Minister U. Makiej to Iraq (August and September, 2014) were initiated by Russia and pursued mainly the Russian interests.

Secondly, it is a careful and cautious approach in the Belarusian foreign policy. In spite of an image of the "last dictatorship in Europe" and periodically appearing anti-Western rhetoric, Belarus avoids challenging the essential interests of powerful states.

Thirdly, the Belarusian government evidently inclines to different corruptive schemes based mainly on personal relations which often contradict the national interests.

Fourthly, Iraq represents an important example for the Belarusian ideology, which in a great degree is based on the "conspiracy rhetoric". In this context, Iraq has been occasionally mentioned in A. Lukašenka's speeches as a vivid demonstration of the advantages of the Belarusian stability. Since the Arab spring of 2011 and especially the war in Ukraine, Iraq has stopped to play its role in the Belarusian ideology.